

THIRTY DAYS THAT SHOOK NORWALK

National Hullabaloo and Local Community Action

JAMES RORTY

THE tumult and the shouting had died by the time I got to Norwalk. The overgrown colonial village, fifty miles northeast of Manhattan on the edge of metropolitan New York's bedroom belt, lay sprawled in the warm sunlight of a precocious February spring, grateful for the thaw that had followed a week of bitter cold; grateful, too, for the peace and quiet that had abruptly descended upon the community after thirty days of a loud but strangely bloodless and anonymous "witch hunt" that had repeatedly claimed the attention of millions of American newspaper readers, radio listeners, and television viewers.

At the White Bridge Filling Station, where the highway crosses one of the numerous tidal inlets that indent Norwalk Bay, we had the tank of our car filled by no less a person than Mr. Albert A. Beres, commander of the Mulroy-Tarlov-Acquino Post of the Veter-

ans of Foreign Wars, and a leading actor in Norwalk's drama. The day before, the national office of the VFW had forbidden Mr. Beres and all other local and state VFW spokesmen to talk. But it is as difficult to put a tight cork in Mr. Beres—an amiable 220-pound ex-sailor right out of *South Pacific*—as it was to conceive of his leading an ugly and fanatical outbreak of vigilantism. He just doesn't seem to be the type.

"Powie!" said Mr. Beres, the nozzle of his gas hose pointing skyward as he tried to express the mixture of consternation and private delight with which the national excitement about the Norwalk "reign of terror" had inundated his uncomplicated psyche. "We get a little publicity in the *Norwalk Hour*, and powie! bam!—all the reporters and radio commentators in America come piling in here. We ain't done nothing to nobody. We weren't trying to—what you call it—screen nobody. We just—arrgh! now you got me talking again!"

Stripped of the vernacular, this roughly approximates the VFW's official version of the affair, released a few days later in Washington after a national conference of VFW state commanders and committee chairmen. There was, of course, a good deal more to it than that. In retrospect the *Thirty Days That Shook Norwalk* seems like a kind of village charade, cooperatively written and staged by local talent, but with a great deal of help from visiting newspaper, radio, and television professionals. Perhaps it can best be understood if it is presented chronologically, just as you may have heard it on the radio or seen it on your television screen.

THE curtain went up on January 16, 1954, when the *Norwalk Hour* carried a banner headline:

HEADLINES in the *New York Times* on January 27 alerted its readers to the newest manifestation of the "witch hunt"—an attack on democratic liberties perpetrated in Norwalk, Connecticut. Just how much of an attack was it? This magazine sent a seasoned journalist, who happens also to be an outstanding civil libertarian, to take an objective look around in Norwalk, and he here offers a kind of case study of the way a few local sparks come to assume the threatening dimensions of a national holocaust. JAMES RORTY is the author of numerous books on radio, advertising, matters of health and food supply, and social problems in general, and has written widely on civil rights and other things in *COMMENTARY* and elsewhere. His most recent article in our pages (August 1953) was "The Anti-Communism of Senator McCarthy," an analysis of the latter's presumed "anti-Communist" opinions and methods which many national commentators consider the most solidly documented exposé published to date.

VFW ENLISTS FBI AID TO CURB SUBVERSIVES; NAMES ARE FORWARDED TO SECURITY OFFICIALS

The story, written to help along a membership drive by a Norwalk VFW member who, like most veterans, rarely attends meetings of his post, declared that "Mulroy-Tarlov-Acquino Post, Veterans of Foreign Wars, emphasizing the fight against Communism during its national membership week of January 24-30, has called upon Norwalk to join other communities in the United States in revitalizing its Americanism program." Names of Norwalk residents whose activities were "not related to a strong America" had been reported to the FBI, continued the story, although in the interests of security the names were concealed "under a veil of secrecy."

Quickly the alarm was sounded on the liberal front. In Norwalk and surrounding towns, telephones rang and cocktail parties buzzed. Something had to be done.

In its issue of January 25 the *Norwalk Hour* carried a paid advertisement headed:

SECRET SMEARS ARE UN-AMERICAN. DON'T YOU THINK SO?

It was signed by Alfred Baker Lewis, secretary of the Connecticut State Branch of Americans for Democratic Action, Devere Allen, editor of the *World Interpreter*, and Donald M. Douglas, a real estate agent, all residents of nearby Connecticut towns. The advertisement charged the veterans with being themselves un-American because they did not reveal what tests they used to determine whether or not their fellow citizens were doing things "not related to a strong America." The ADA group challenged the VFW Post to a debate on "whether or not their secret reports on people who fail to pass unannounced tests of strong Americanism are really patriotic."

THE veterans had asked for it, but that didn't make them the less infuriated.

They hadn't smeared anybody, publicly or privately. Their Americanism program was no different from that of scores of other VFW posts. They hadn't snooped, slandered, or attempted to sit in judgment on their fellow citizens—at least no evidence that they had actually done any of these things was ever produced. What their commander had actually done, by his own subsequent admission, was to relay to the FBI a report by a member of the Post about a single suspected Communist whose identity was never made public.

But unhappily, in addition to this routine action, in which liberals could have found little ground for objection or alarm, the Post had undeniably sponsored a stupid membership-recruitment publicity story, loaded with large and ominous phrases, and now the veterans were stuck with it, in a face-saving posture of defense that became more and more untenable.

So, with no preparation, aptitude, or stomach for the role, the veterans of the Norwalk VFW Post rapidly became the bad boys of the nation, scolded by all right-thinking—as well as left-thinking—publicists, magisterially reproved by the American Civil Liberties Union and the American Committee for Cultural Freedom, viewed with alarm by liberal Senators and Congressmen, let down even by President Eisenhower, who suggested at a press conference that they had better watch out for the libel laws.

What hurt most was that they were becoming almost without honor in their own community, which they had always been the first to serve whenever there was a civic emergency like a tornado or a flood, or a dirty job of plane-watching to do. Now Norwalk was turning against them. *Vox populi* was being heard in the letters column of the *Norwalk Hour* and four out of five of the letters—including some written by members of the VFW—were critical. The local ministers' association drafted a grave protest. Even the Chief of Police declared publicly that they had stepped out of their depth and had better leave red-hunting to the FBI.

IN HIS distress, Commander Beres asked for and promptly got the support of his National Commander, Wayne E. Richards, who on January 27 released a statement denying that the Norwalk Post's program was a witch hunt. Commander Richards pointed out that as far back as 1940 the national office of the VFW had been asked by J. Edgar Hoover to aid the security program and that it had accordingly advised its members to report to the nearest FBI office "any information they may have concerning persons, organizations, or actions suspected of threatening the security of the country." (Note that neither J. Edgar Hoover nor Commander Richards said anything about denouncing people for doing things "not related to a strong America.")

Commander Richards's statement was much too little and too late. Like a bad head cold, the Norwalk affair had to run its course. It reached a second-act climax on the evening of January 28, when about a hundred of Mulroy-Tarlov-Acquino Post's three hundred and fifty members met to discuss the progress of their Americanism program. After a lively three-hour meeting, Commander Beres emerged to confront a major mobilization of wire-service reporters, newsreel cameramen, and television crews. Flanked by the State VFW Commander and the state chairman of Connecticut's Americanism Committee, Mr. Beres read a prepared statement in which he declared that the Post had unanimously adopted a motion expressing its "confidence in the progress of the Americanism activities program and authorizing the Commander to continue a committee which has been working towards the objective of a strong America."

"At the specific direction of the membership," said Commander Beres, "the names of the members of the Post working on Americanism were not disclosed."

THE next morning the *New York Times* headlined the story:

MEMBERS UPHOLD V.F.W. "RED HUNT"; NORWALK UNIT BACKS

SPECIAL COMMITTEE; NATO WRITERS HEAR LISTING "EXPLAINED"

Rather fortunately than otherwise, as it turned out, the Post's meeting date had coincided with the arrival in Norwalk of a dozen foreign journalists, escorted by David Martin, executive director of the National Council for NATO, and Edward W. Barrett, former Assistant Secretary of State. The visitors goggled at the newspaper headlines, listened to the profuse apologies of Mayor Irving C. Freese for "this very unfortunate situation," and remarked that it was a curious "reign of terror" in which everybody in town was talking at the top of his voice. Britain's representative interviewed Commander Beres and reported that, whatever else might be said of him, Mr. Beres was definitely not the vigilante type. On the whole the NATO journalists seem to have been neither upset nor confused. They saw the Norwalk affair as the bumbling flap of a well-intentioned run-of-the-mine VFW Post which had been energetically rebuked by its own community after occasioning a disproportionate national uproar.

This, however, was not at all the impression conveyed by the *Times'* Fairfield County correspondent, who wrote that Mr. Barrett "did his best to explain the whole thing away" and that Mr. Martin had authorized this interpretation of Mr. Barrett's remarks. Mr. Martin denied this, but not in time to prevent the *Times* from publishing a vicarious editorial blush for the nation. Said the *Times*:

"The FBI encourages every citizen to report Federal crimes, but it does not encourage the kind of snooping, scandalmongering, and spiteful gossip that is suggested by the VFW's plan. The VFW, to do it justice, doesn't use these words in describing its plan, but it is fairly easy to guess what sort of field day the plan, if carried out, must produce. And, be it noted, the campaign is not confined to Norwalk. It is a national program.

"What the visiting journalists think of it

all one can't tell. One hopes they won't think that the nagging of people on account of their thoughts or words is typical of Norwalk or any other American community."

Thus, as the VFW's harassed National Commander was later to observe, do mythical oaks from tiny acorns grow.

FOR two straight weeks the Norwalk affair went steadily from bad to worse. Appearing on Ed Murrow's "See It Now" show February 2, Commander Beres again slipped a syntax or two: "It is nice to know that you all beared the stress of the cold with us and stood along, and that now that you are here, we have got a statement to put out to America today, and this is the statement expressed by the members of this Post." On the same program the literate and liberal Chief Justice Charles S. Daugherty, of the Criminal Courts of Cook County, Illinois, and national chairman of the VFW's Americanism Committee, publicly repudiated his Norwalk comrades, declaring that they had "temporarily forgotten that the responsibility for ferreting out Communists in the United States is the responsibility of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. . . . The great danger that lies in a situation such as this is that people having no experience in investigating matters are not competent to pass upon these questions, and there is grave danger in an operation of this sort that unsupported charges and non-provable charges will be made against individuals. . . . If all the Posts throughout America began operating in this same style, we would be building up in America a police state where neighbor would be spying upon neighbor, and such a condition would bring out a feeling of hysteria throughout the length and breadth of the land that would be difficult to overcome."

That day all the CBS news shows carried the Norwalk affair, and the other networks ran not far behind.

WHAT happened next was generally interpreted at the time as a strategic retreat, initiated by the national office to get

the VFW off the hook. Actually it appears to have been only one of numerous fortuitous happenings in the Norwalk comedy of errors. In anticipation of a forthcoming conference of the VFW's state commanders and Americanism Committee chairmen in Washington, the local VFW officers had been advised not to talk. Mr. Beres was therefore not available to represent the Norwalk Post on February 7, when the Fairfield County Forum was scheduled to discuss the Americanism program on Station WNLK. Instead, there appeared a much more sophisticated person, Mrs. Suzanne Silvercruys Stevenson, a member of the Women's Auxiliary of the Mulroy-Tarlov-Acquino Post, a daughter of the late Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Belgium, and a sister of the present Belgian Ambassador to the United States. Sizzling Susie, as she is known to her platform admirers, is a sculptress, author, lecturer, and founder of the Minute Women of America.*

Although Mrs. Stevenson did not represent officially either the VFW Post or the Minute Women, she took the trouble, the day before the broadcast, to quiz Mr. Beres about what he and other members of the Norwalk Post's by now notorious "secret screening committee" had actually done. Then, at the broadcast, she brought the

*The Minute Women of the U.S.A., Inc., describes itself as "a non-sectarian, non-partisan Crusade, dedicated to preserve, protect, and promote the Constitution of the United States of America and the freedom it guarantees to individual citizens: We are dedicated to protect our country from Communism, Socialism, Fascism, or Collectivism in any form." It is one of a number of similarly dedicated organizations of patriotic women—mostly middle and upper class—which includes the Blue Star Mothers, Liberty Belles, and Freedom Clubs. The Minute Women was founded in 1949 at a meeting in Mrs. Stevenson's Norwalk home, and after serving as its first president Mrs. Stevenson continues as "national advisor." When interviewed by the Bridgeport *Herald* she expressed her concern about Communist infiltration in the schools, as evidenced by the "un-American" notions the children sometimes bring home to their parents. To the writer, however, she repudiated vigorously the rumor, widely circulated during the VFW controversy, that she had advocated mobilizing the moppets as informers against their teachers.

drama of Norwalk's *Thirty Days* to an unexpected dénouement. Performing with the aplomb of a seasoned trouper, Mrs. Stevenson informed her radio audience that the Norwalk VFW Post had never appointed or contemplated the appointment of a secret committee to turn in to the FBI Norwalk residents suspected of being Communisticly inclined. Any statement to the contrary, she added, was not only untrue but "practically subversive." All that had happened, insisted Mrs. Stevenson, was that "somebody had suspected somebody," and that when this somebody had proved unwilling to make the report directly, "poor Mr. Beres" had undertaken to carry the message to the Fairfield County FBI office. For that, although the reporting of persons suspected of subversive activities is a duty placed upon every patriotic citizen by formal FBI requests, backed by repeated Presidential executive orders, Mr. Beres had been unjustly denounced and slandered. The Post itself, acting as a committee of the whole, and with every member bound by his oath to report subversives, was the only committee that had ever been appointed.

PRACTICALLY everybody assumed that Mrs. Stevenson was telling a diplomatic whopper, although nobody was ungracious enough to say so. Either there *had* been a secret committee, appointed to sift the reports of the members concerning suspected Communists, or Commander Beres and State Commander Charles J. Post, who had repeatedly asserted the existence of such a committee in print and on the air, had been guilty of some incredibly irresponsible play-acting. In fact, there is no actual record that any committee was ever either appointed or elected.

But by this time Norwalk, thoroughly fed up, didn't much care what had really happened, if only it would end. Mrs. Stevenson's authorized denial pulled the rug out from under her opponents—Bern Dibner, a Norwalk industrialist, and Stetson Holmes of Darien, director of the Mid-European Study Center, National Committee for Free Europe—and the Fairfield County Forum mum-

bled to a dispirited conclusion. When interviewed later, Commander Beres backstopped his substitute, adding plaintively: "We're not looking for nobody."

The Minute Woman had closed the show, for Norwalk and for the nation. Ten days later, when National Commander Wayne E. Richards released a 2,000-word statement on the Norwalk episode, it got a couple of sticks on an inside page of the *Times*, an even briefer brushoff by the wire services, and nothing on the air. After again denying the existence in Norwalk or elsewhere of "vigilante committees" formed to investigate, evaluate, or screen the names of suspected Communists, Mr. Richards declared: "According to the Norwalk Post Commander, who has now had time to adjust himself and think clearly, there is not and never has been a Post Committee ferreting out suspects in secret meetings. The so-called 'screening committee' was a figment of imagination, based on a fast defense mechanism of a plain citizen when he found himself projected without warning or time to think into the center of a national controversy, and on the receiving end of involved questions of civic responsibility that would tax the ingenuity of a Philadelphia lawyer."

Poor Mr. Beres. In the end his superiors, however reluctantly, had to throw him to the wolves. But doubtless there have been compensations. It was quite a show while it lasted.

There were even compensations for the bedeviled national office of the VFW, which toward the end got a chance to establish its genuine innocence of either recommending or permitting witch-hunting. On February 28, in what proved to be the last flicker of the Norwalk controversy, Commander Beres and National Commander Richards appeared with James E. Doyle, national chairman of Americans for Democratic Action, on the "American Forum of the Air." The discussion showed the two organizations to be in substantial agreement on both the right and the duty of citizens to report suspected subversives to the FBI, and on the importance of observing J. Edgar Hoover's directive of

July 26, 1950, which said, "The FBI is interested in receiving facts; we are not interested in what a person thinks but in what he does which undermines our internal security. Avoid reporting malicious gossip, or idle rumor."

NORWALK'S retrospective evaluation of its witchless witch hunt is proud or rueful, depending on whom one talks to. In general, the ADA group seemed to feel that by alerting the community and the nation Norwalk's Paul Reveres *may* have averted what *might* have developed into a nasty epidemic of amateur snooping and tale-telling. This was also approximately the view of the Reverend Harold E. Martin, pastor of the Congregational Church-on-the-Green. Toward the end of Norwalk's Thirty Days, Dr. Martin devoted a sermon to the controversy in which he acknowledged the VFW's good intentions but pointed out that "snooping, scandalmongering, and spiteful gossip quite naturally and almost inevitably grow out of secret committees making secret denunciations. Such a system of reporting can become a witch hunt."

Actually, as Dr. Martin acknowledged to the writer, there was no witch hunt nor even any serious threat of one. Yet tension had risen in the community—enough to alarm a couple of German émigrés, members of his congregation, who thought they recognized the beginning of the terror they had experienced abroad. And a pair of shut-in old ladies, descendants of early colonists, had expressed similar alarm and indignation. Members of his flock had told him after the sermon: "It took courage to say that"—although Dr. Martin hadn't felt especially heroic.

Another group, which included some of the most politically sophisticated liberals in the area, insisted that what had occurred was a crisis, not of civil liberties, but of communications, fabricated almost wholly out of newspaper space and radio and television time. Included in this group was Dr. Samuel Schultz, the liberal rabbi of Temple Beth-el, who stubbornly refused to say anything for publication during the controversy. Instead,

in the midst of Norwalk's synthetic "reign of terror," Dr. Schultz had a local Negro pastor take over the Temple service.

Norwalk, as these liberals point out, is a rather enlightened community on all fronts, including race relations, always a major focus of Communist agitation. There have been Negroes in Norwalk for two hundred years and today Negro families live in every quarter of the town. When a white mob in Cicero, Illinois, attempted to prevent Dr. Harvey E. Clark, Jr., from occupying the house he had purchased, Mayor Irving C. Freese paid his fare to Norwalk, received him on the steps of the city hall, and invited him to settle in the town, which has three integrated public housing developments where Negroes and whites live together in complete amity. Dr. Clark chose to stick it out in Cicero, but a Negro physician occupies a two-hundred-year-old colonial house on the village green a few doors from the Congregational church.

Even Norwalk's Republicans belong predominantly to the Eisenhower wing of the party. Senator McCarthy, who spoke in Bridgeport during the last campaign, was not asked to visit Norwalk. Henry Myers, a Norwalk industrialist who is chairman of the Fairfield County Republican Finance Committee, is generally credited with the responsibility for this public slight.* The most

*Although Senator McCarthy has addressed a national convention of the VFW and although the Americanism committees of both the VFW and the American Legion have supported the activities of his committee and other Congressional investigating committees, the individual posts of both veterans organizations enjoy broad autonomy and frequently exercise it. For example, when Senator McCarthy conducted an abusive cross-examination of General Zwicker, the VFW Post in the General's home town of Stoughton, Wisconsin, sprang to his defense. In a unanimous resolution the Stoughton VFW Post declared that General Zwicker, "a valiant soldier," had been "outrageously abused and insulted." The resolution noted further that "Senator McCarthy's service record includes resigning from the service before the war with Japan was over . . . false claims about alleged wounds . . . false claims that he had entered the service as a buck private . . . efforts to promote decorations for himself."

vocal of the local McCarthyites is former State Senator Strofolino, defeated candidate for mayor in the last election. (Mr. Strofolino furnished comic relief on the Fairfield County Forum program, where he was teamed with Mrs. Stevenson. Just before he was shut off by the moderator, Mr. Strofolino was heard shouting: "These people won't let me tell you people what Communism is. I just—").

THE people in Norwalk who really understand what Communism is are the local anti-Communist labor and race-relations organizers. They have no time for witch-hunting because they are too busy checkmating the Communist and pro-Communist activity in the area, of which there is a good deal. (Mayor Freese was way off when he said the local Communists could be counted on the fingers of one hand. On the authority of sources better informed than the Mayor, it can be stated that there is more than one Communist ring operating in the Norwalk-Bridgeport industrial nexus.)

From the point of view of these realistic working anti-Communists, Norwalk's Thirty Days was a stupid snafu that helped only the Communists and their by now elaborately camouflaged followers. Why, they ask disgustedly, didn't the *Norwalk Hour*, instead of bannerizing the VFW Post's bid for membership, give it the quarter column on page eight that it rated? And why did the ADA liberals have to compound the newspaper's mistake by squaring off against the veterans, challenging them to a debate, and thereby needlessly polarizing the community? Why didn't they go to Commander Beres quietly through some of the liberal and labor union members of his Post and ask him to publish a corrective statement? If they had done that, would there have been any coast-to-coast press and television hullabaloes for national consumption and foreign pick-up?

This, perhaps, is the most serious question raised by the whole serio-comic affair. In an age so dominated by mass communications as ours is, it may be said that certain issues do

not really exist until they have been created by the news services. It is possible that the glare of publicity flashed into Norwalk's sleepy eyes may have averted a nasty epidemic of snooping. But it is also possible that Norwalk left to itself, and to its own self-regulating voluntary community devices, would have continued on its more or less sober and more or less responsible ways. Many of those in Norwalk who would be most sensitive to violations of civil rights believe that this latter possibility was the stronger one, and they do not thank the *Norwalk Hour*, the *New York Times*, the national press services, the ADA, and the sensation-hungry television crews for their noisy intervention, however well-intentioned. A few, indeed, would go so far as to question even the good intentions, suggesting that the spokesmen of liberalism, like their opposite numbers on the "right," are sometimes more interested in headlines than in consequences. Who was helped, they ask, by a publicity campaign picturing Mr. Beres and his fellow veterans as Storm Troopers? Not Norwalk, they think, and not the cause of responsible democracy, which in most American communities has shown itself able to protect democratic freedoms, even "in the present climate." And not the cause of the West with the embattled peoples of Europe, and the Far East.

Hindsight is always omniscient, but these working liberals—vigorously opposed to Communism and, one is forced to add, just as vigorously opposed to vigilantism—have earned a right to be heard. Maybe Norwalk, or the next American community that is threatened with a synthetic "witch hunt," will do better another time. The day I came to Norwalk, efforts were being made to set up a committee of liberal watchdogs to guard against the excesses of the VFW watchdogs. But the day I left, liberals who were asked to join this super-watchdog committee of "liberal" minute men and women were saying *ohne mich*. It seemed clear then that the Thirty Days could be considered definitely over.